

Capstone Experiences in Art Education

Reflective Practice Portfolio

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AE 7200

The content of the following essays examines the process of exploring my teaching and my current practices within art education. Through the contents of each essay, I discovered ways to provide students with challenges that will maintain and enhance their creative thinking.

Introduction

My training and professional experience as an artist and an educator have provided me with the understanding that the art of teaching requires tenacity, creativity and perseverance. Upon entering the Mostly On-Line Master's program at The Ohio State University, I wanted to improve my ability to engage students within the study of art. As an art educator, one of my professional goals is to assist students in understanding our media savvy culture. Students need to be able to examine and discuss visual images that are relevant to their lives through thoughtful analysis. Secondly, I believe that effective teaching involves refining and evolving teaching strategies to meet the needs of students. Through pursuing my Master's of Art Education, I had hoped to continue to evolve my teaching practices to effectively utilize and explore technology in order to enhance and enrich the art experiences of my students. Finally, I want students to develop an understanding of the process of art-making. Students need time to develop their skills with various media and techniques and to understand the processes behind those techniques. Moreover, students need to be able to develop their understanding that making art is a personal endeavor. "Work in the arts is not only a way of creating performances and products; it is a way of creating our lives by expanding our consciousness, shaping our dispositions, satisfying our quest for meaning, establishing contact with others, and sharing a culture" (Eisner, 2002, p.13). Art gives us the ability to communicate a personal viewpoint and share our story.

Currently, I teach at Joseph K. Lumsden Bahweting Anishnabe Public School Academy located in Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan. JKL Bahweting School serves

approximately 475 students, grades K-8 and is both a Bureau of Indian Affairs school and a Michigan Charter school. JKL Bahweting is located within a public school district that has had a significant Native American drop-out rate. More than half the students attending JKL Bahweting are Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indian members. JKL Bahweting School incorporates, celebrates and preserves Anishnabe traditions, culture and language within the everyday experiences of the students and teachers. The students within JKL Bahweting come from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds with 62% of students participating within the free and reduced lunch program.

At JKL Bahweting each academic elementary classroom (K-5) possesses a teacher and a full-time Para-professional to assist with student needs and facilitating learning. Academics are also supported through the intervention strategies of nine full-time academic service providers (Title I teachers). Class sizes are generally small, with the common teacher to student ratio per classroom of 2:20. In the past, JKL Bahweting has been honored by the U.S. Department of Education with the Title I Distinguished School Award. However, recently JKL Bahweting has been labeled a “Focus School” by the Michigan Department of Education because state assessment results demonstrated that there are large achievement gaps, between the average scale score for the top 30% of students and the bottom 30% of students. As a response to the increased need to provide academic interventions to struggling students and close the achievement gap, students within the lowest 20% (excluding special education students) in Reading and Math receive extra academic intervention time during “specials”. The hope is to assist students to work to their fullest academic potential and to assist them in meeting or exceeding academic proficiency at grade level.

As a result of the increased need for academic interventions, I generally have 5-6 students missing from every class. This style of pull-out intervention practice creates a hierarchy of learning experiences and provides the benefit of visual arts programming to only an elite few. Through this exclusion process it has been silently communicated that the arts are non-essential to growth, development and learning. For me, I have begun to devise how I can create an arts programming and curriculum that engages high levels of learning through the active participation that the arts provide. How can I demonstrate that the arts are necessary and indispensable to the development of children? How can I create learning opportunities for students that demonstrate that the arts engage problem solving strategies? How can I develop ways that assist students in developing and honing creative thinking processes and skills?

Through my coursework, I began to critically investigate the purpose, function and role of art education within schools. Nationwide schools are cutting back or eliminating their art programs because of financial constraints and a push for increased academic achievement. Studies have demonstrated that the study of art benefits students significantly with improved test scores, graduation and employable skills. In addition, a study conducted over a period of ten years by Catterall & Dumais (2012), found that active involvement within the arts gave significant advantages for low socioeconomic status students in college enrollment, gainful employment, and significant correlations for volunteerism and voting (p.11). In addition, research has demonstrated that American creativity has been declining. Creative thinking requires divergent thinking by generating many unique ideas and then convergent thinking to combine those ideas together to achieve the optimal result (Bronson & Merryman,

2010). In identifying the skills that 21st century learners will need in order to be successful, seventy-two percent of business leaders identified creativity as being the number one desirable skill in a potential employee. However, many courses that encourage creative thinking in high school are not graduation requirements (Lichtenberg, Woock, & Wright, 2008).

The content of the following essays examines the process of exploring my teaching and my current practices within art education. Through the contents of each essay, I discovered ways to provide students with challenges that will maintain and enhance their creative thinking. Exploring and fostering creativity became essential in assisting my students experience and begin to understand the artistic process. Within my first essay, *Making the Familiar Strange: Teaching Artmaking Using Big Ideas*, I investigated the role and exploration and creative "play" with concepts, ideas and media. These fundamental strategies assisted students in developing their ideas and making meaningful connections with the Big Idea. Through scaffolding and planning, "play" became a process for which students began developing an artistic and meaningful and engaging experience within the arts.

The second essay, *"Why Do We Have to Write in ART?": How Digital Storytelling Enhances Creative Process In Art Education*, further explores enhancing creativity through the active use of technology and storytelling processes. Students were challenged to investigate how art can be utilized to convey and communicate stories through the use of digital technologies. Rather than allowing students to learn passively through technology, I wanted to provide a rigorous challenge that would utilize the unique learning opportunities that technology can provide. My students began to think

critically about how stories are a vital and necessary human experience and how digital tools can enhance communication. Moreover, students began to explore learning through combining technology and the structure of the artistic process. Technology must be combined with art in order for students to understand that creativity can be investigated through technological measures.

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Making the Familiar Strange

Teaching Artmaking Using Big Ideas

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Based on Dr. Sydney Walker's course AE

"How can you be an *art teacher* and not create Art?" I stammered, as I grappled with this question as we debriefed in my undergraduate art education classes. I was meeting with my undergraduate art education cohorts and we were discussing our student teaching experiences. It seemed odd to me that my mentor teacher did not actively practice her own artmaking. As I became a working professional, I began to discover how difficult it was to be actively engaged within the artistic process while teaching. Although, my ideas and projects that were oriented for my students flourished, I could find little inspiration in creating my own works. I struggled with maintaining my own artistic integrity while being consumed with nurturing the creative endeavors of my students. I was riddled with doubt of my ability to create art that could hold more profound meaning other than creating art for art's sake.

RECONNECTING WITH THE ROLE OF ARTMAKING AND THE ARTISTIC PROCESS

Through the contents of AE 604, The Artmaking Process, I became more engaged with developing a deeper understanding of the process of artmaking. I began to examine strategies that could assist in rupturing my obstructed sense of artmaking. First, I needed to fully understand how to work within the conceptual framework of a "Big Idea". Big ideas can assist artists in examining personal connections that are fundamental for meaningful artmaking. Broad-based Big Ideas examine important elements of human-issues. In addition, examining and analyzing the work and artistic processes of contemporary artists assisted in developing insight into the methodology and strategies to explore creative avenues of artmaking.

Purposeful play, risk taking, experimentation, postponement of final meaning, search and questioning are all strategies within artmaking that assist in investigating a Big Idea. In

addition, these practices help artists discover and solidify meaning through the artmaking process. In examining the work of Sandy Skoglund, Shirin Neshat and Jasper Johns, I developed a better understanding of the methodologies artist's incorporate to assist them in generating new concepts, perspectives and approaches to artmaking. For example, artist Sandy Skoglund uses the act of purposeful play as a method of experimentation to assist her in allowing her artwork to gradually evolve. In addition, she postpones meaning making and closure throughout the artmaking process. As a result, Skoglund explores her ideas more fully rather than relying on preconceived concepts through the progression of her artmaking.

Similarly to Skoglund, I found that the act of purposeful play allowed me to explore the possibilities of a media or subject matter. I found this to be liberating in the sense that I did not feel as if I had to produce something of grandeur from a session of artmaking. When producing the series *The Christmas Bazaar Bake Sale*, I used dough, decorative candy and other baking materials to explore the concept of ritual. I knew I wanted some sort of dough that could be molded and shaped similarly to cookie dough. I used many ingredients such as flour, salt, oil, eggs and

water to make dough like paste- adding more flour until it was the consistency of a nice workable dough. While

mixing my media, I had to think about how this dough might perform- would it keep its shape,



Figure 1: Selected work from *The Christmas Bazaar Bake Sale*. This work demonstrates playful practices through the artmaking process.

could it be baked and potentially change its viscosity through that process? Like Skoglund, I let the media materials guide me to the results of my finalized figurative forms.

FROM DBAE TO 'BIG IDEAS'

Contemporary artists and the practice of artmaking have fundamentally evolved from traditional practices heralded by Western ideals and processes of artmaking. These traditional methodologies have guided Disciplined Based Art Education (DBAE) and other approaches to art educational practices. DBAE uses the formal structure of art to analyze an idea, apply the idea by exploring techniques and media, and to make judgments about art informed by close observation without personal bias. Through the structure of DBAE, "students are asked to interpret a variety of views, cultures, and genres based on the formal properties of art rather than personal opinion" (Halstead, 2008, p.43). However, understanding the formal elements in a work of art, does not engage within the experience and process of artmaking. The creation of art is not about assembly line products where students are asked to imitate the style of an artist with little engagement in the process, or purpose of the artist. Rather, art communicates the human experience and can assist students into developing a dialogue and unique perspective about how they envision the world. By examining diverse contemporary models and purposes of artmaking, I began to re-examine my own artmaking and my teaching pedagogy.

Research supports that creativity scores in America have been on decline in primary grade children (Bronson & Merryman, 2010, para. 5). In many educational settings, the focus of testing and assessing of student achievement relies on final products and rubrics that give

emphasis to predictable, pre-determined outcomes (Zimmerman, 2009, p.394). As a result, students are often disengaged within the process of learning and lack the motivation to pursue questions that go beyond rote memorization skills and demonstrate divergent thinking. Within the visual arts, creativity cannot simply rely on "self-expression" as an inquiry based process that produces high levels of creative engagement. The visual arts can assist in preparing students for the informational age of the 21st century through interventions that foster creative thinking, imagination, innovation and generate potential real life solutions to real life problems and experiences (Zimmerman, 2009, p.394).

Creative thinking requires divergent thinking that generates many unique ideas and then the ability to use convergent thinking to combine ideas to create the best result (Bronson & Merryman, 2010, para. 2). How can engaging within the artistic process assist in developing broad-based divergent thinking? As I became more attuned with the process of experimenting with my own artmaking, I began to devise how I could nurture students to devise and develop problem solving in unique ways and encourage creativity. Purposeful play, risk taking, experimentation, search and questioning are life skills that can assist students in becoming independent learners capable of serious inquiry.

CHANGES TO TEACHING PRACTICES

I began planning to improve my arts curriculum with integrating Big Ideas as a conceptual framework to enhance student's personal connections with artmaking. I restructured or eliminated projects that



Figure 2: An artwork of a second grade student that models DBAE approach to artmaking.

relied heavily on DBAE modes of formalism as art production. I began seeking more contemporary models of art and visual culture. Integrating visual culture and popular culture was a necessity to my new curriculum as my students living in rural Michigan have little understanding of the world of "high art."

In the past I had worked with Big Ideas. However, I don't feel as if I gave students enough structure and scaffolding to progress through the Big Idea. Often, the student's inquiry into the Big Idea would teeter on the edge of the safety of the superficial, lacking the depth of meaning to foster questions beyond the artroom. I wanted to be able to assist students into developing their ideas beyond their initial premise. I needed to provide ways to guide students through the process of finding meaningful connections to the Big Idea. Moreover, I wanted students to be able to incorporate divergent thinking, where the interplay of question and answer seeking could move beyond the scope of learning in the artroom.

Exploration and creative "play" with concepts, ideas and media became fundamental in assisting students in developing their ideas and making meaningful connections with the Big Idea. Through scaffolding and planning, "play" became a process for which students began developing an artistic and meaningful and engaging experience within the arts. In

addition, my students began to interact, collaborate and share ideas through the "fun". While integrating play as a source of artistic investigation, I tried to keep the essential questions



Figure 3: *The great sculpture race: Student teams collaborate to create sculptures with limited materials and time.*

related to the play open-ended. Chaille and Britain (1997) suggest that it is the teacher's role to structure a rich environment, observe what children are doing and thinking, and interact in a nondirective manner. Teachers should "encourage problem solving, perspective taking, and/or consideration of feelings" (Chaille & Britain, 1997, 65).

During investigative play activities within my classroom I might work towards assisting students develop their play by asking them questions to make them consider new ways of knowing, considering and creating. Questions like "What else could you do?" or "Is there another way to....?" offer a variety of creative outcomes and applications of learning. In addition, as I was facilitating "play" I would ask the students to

describe how they accomplished or worked through a problem. This assisted students in solidifying their thoughts and helped them develop their play experiences. In addition, I would have closure to play activities where students would share in groups their experiences.

Students would excitedly engage in sharing ideas for helping a peer with a creative solution to a "play" problem. My students were empowered by refreshing approaches to understanding and learning.

LESSON PLANS & STUDENT WORK

In working with my 3rd graders we began working on the Big Idea of *place* with the topic of *fantasy & reality*. I selected this Big Idea because the concept of reality and fantasy are



Figure 4: An artwork created by a 6th grader during a mystery paper bag sculpture activity. Students were given limited materials and parameters. Students were investigating through purposeful play the limitations of various sculptural media.

deeply ingrained within the human experience. Fantasy is an essential skill of childhood and allows children to explore, challenge and blur the lines of reality. Students of this age spend much time teetering between the real world experiences of school and home life which may contrast wildly with their world of fantasy. Students spend hours absorbed in virtual worlds, fantasies created by technology, television or daydreaming.

In introducing the big idea of place I first wanted to examine places that exist in reality. I wanted students to work with everyday places. Students worked in collaborative groups and sorted and categorized images of everyday places with similar characteristics. Images included large cities and urban neighborhoods, industrial places, suburban places, rural places. The students compared and contrasted everyday places within our community. From our discussions, students were asked to design an everyday place.

In the following class session before introducing the oppositional topic of fantasy places, I created a "play" warm up activity to engage my students. Students were presented with one of the reality place images from the week prior in class. Each student in class had a corresponding partner in the room, however, the students did not know that



Figure 5: A third grade student working on a "play" warm up activity; *How can places be transformed?*

within the beginning of the activity. Students were asked to transform the place from reality

into a fantasy or dream. The class was asked to define the concept of transformation; “How can places be transformed?” After a brief discussion students were given the parameters of the warm-up play. Students were instructed to include something within the image that would still connect their fantasy to the “real place”. Students were given 10 minutes to construct a new image.

During the warm-up process some students were immediately engaged, their pencils flew around their paper as they offered enthralling narratives about their fantasy place. I heard stories about what changes occurred to make the place transform. One boy remarked, “I transformed this farm by changing the types of things that are grown there. Aliens came and created hybrid corn and changed the way that people farm.” Other students struggled with *how* to transform a place, cries of “I am not sure what to do!” or “This is hard!” echoed in the room. I did expect this reaction as my students in 3rd grade had not worked intensively with Big Ideas. Moreover, I had intentionally not given them much scaffolding to assist them in formulating images with the inclusion of fantasy elements. Ultimately, I wanted to see what they would be able to construct on their own without the aid of contemporary artists examples and facilitated learning. Through doing this I was able to see where they were starting at within the Big Idea and to develop a better understanding of what they would need to be successful.

After the allotted time students were asked to find their “partner”. As the students partnered up I heard comments like, “Wow! I would have never thought of that!” and “That is so cool!”. Students joyously gabbed about their new fantasy places. We discussed “What remained real in your artwork? What became a fantasy? How did you blur the lines?” Most

students could identify the difference of real imagery and fantasy within their work. However, when asked how they could “blur the lines” most were unable to describe how fantasy and reality could become seamless and interchangeable.

After the activity students were asked to brainstorm a list of key concepts about fantasy. The 3rd grade students linked fantasy and dreams. Dreams were important to help create fantasy. In addition, students thought fantasy was using your imagination to create. Students were introduced to René Magritte and the concept of surrealism. For surrealist artist's, the nonsensical quality of dreams was an essential source of inspiration. Surrealists believed that art should not have to be based within reality and make sense. Surrealist artists desired their art to reflect the freedom and flux of the subconscious mind. However Magritte differed from other Surrealist artists in the sense that he would play with proportional and scale of objects in everyday settings. As a result the "familiar" becomes strange, creating a world that defies common sense precepts. "I don't paint visions," he once said. "To the best of my capability, by painterly means, I describe objects — and the mutual relationship of objects — in such a way that none of our habitual concepts or feelings is necessarily linked with them."

Using open ended questions, I guided the 3rd graders through viewing several images by Magritte. Students were asked to describe what was real, what was unreal and why. After going through this process the students were asked to how Magritte's artwork made them feel. While looking at *Personal Values* (1951- 1952), one boy remarked "It feels so odd to me because he did a really good job of making the things (objects in the room) look so real. But, the objects are so huge!" Good observation, why do you suppose he made the objects so big? A girl raised her

hand "Maybe those objects are important to him." After quite a bit of lengthy discussion about the strange world of the familiar, I presented the students with creating an artwork that includes reality and fantasy. I challenged the students about how they could use everyday objects in an unexpected way. Students took their drawings of a "real" place and began to alter that place to make it fit the concept of fantasy. However, I challenged the students to begin this drawing by working upside-down to make the familiar strange.

As the students worked through the process they would collaborate and discuss their ideas. What would happen if this part of my drawing were now underwater? Can I create a fantasy place that would take place within a video game? My students were excited, engaged and thinking about how to manipulate reality to become more like a fantasy. As they worked I would engage them back into the big idea of place by working in essential questions as checks for their understanding. We often returned to our essential question of "How can places be transformed?" and "How can reality be represented in an unexpected or unfamiliar way?"



Figure 6: *Surreal Places: Making the familiar strange.* Artwork by 3rd grade students. Students were asked to create a place that incorporated ideas and objects from reality and create a fantasy by altering or transforming reality.

These questions kept the students grounded within the challenge of the project and lead to many avenues of divergent thoughts.

While introducing my 5th grade students to Big Ideas I wanted to explore Fantasy/Reality with the topic of identity. Contemporary Artist Patricia Piccinini explores identity and identity issues through her animal-like sculptures. Piccinini's sculptures depict fantastic hybrid creature with shockingly human characteristics. Piccinini's work finds complex relationship between nature and human intervention. Kent (2002) explained, "Her works invite the question: what is it that makes us who we are? For if the body can be unmade and remade through technology, what implication does this have for our identity as human beings?"

The 5th graders brainstormed a list of their personal characteristics and traits that were unique about them. Could these traits be replicated in an animal? The students utilized similes to compare their personal characteristics to an animal. The simile structure assisted them in analyzing similar characteristics. In addition, using similes made them think about the true qualities of that animal. The students went into research mode with little intervention from me. They got books from the library and brought their netbooks to class in order to learn more about their selected animals.

If human traits could be replicated in an animal what would that animal look like? How can you replicate your traits or characteristics within your new hybrid animal? The students began to examine how to combine their animals together to represent themselves. Students



Figure 7: *Simile Self Identity Portraits: How can you replicate your traits or characteristics within your new hybrid animal?*

took note of the unique qualities of each animal. Representing the texture, the markings and physical characteristics were important to the students. The 5th graders remained highly engaged throughout the process, practicing and creating new layouts.

In the beginning of class we would turn to our essential questions to align us with the Big Idea. With each class the level of inquiry from the students became greater. The students became more interested in learning media and techniques to improve their work. Moreover, the students started asking the questions! "Mrs. Schreiber, what exactly would an animal like this eat?" Through their questioning the last phase of the project came to fruition. What would this new creature need to survive? How could the habitat of this animal represent both real and unreal environments? In class we examined various "real" locations of animals and brainstormed a list of the different types of habitats. The students began to formulate what combination of elements their hybrid animal would need to survive. During this planning phase, I heard students talking to each other, "My animal has wings but it can also swim in water." His friend replied, "Why don't you try a river in the sky?"

SUMMARY OF TEACHING & LEARNING

As art educators our job is to not only provide students with artmaking problems but to encourage them to reshape, redefine, restate and reconsider artmaking from a personal perspective (Walker, p.53). Being an art educator can



Figure 8: 5th Grade Simile -Self Identity Portrait completed.

be exhausting in the sense that we are always aiming to inspire. We aspire to find the corresponding relationships with cross discipline studies, relate art to everyday life and try to bring the art to the classroom in the hopes that our students will understand the value of art.

Since I have begun to utilize Big Ideas within my teaching I have discovered how to engage my students in a more authentic experience of the process of creating art. Art communicates the human experience and can assist students into developing a dialogue and a unique perspective about how they envision the world. There are many avenues of teaching Big Ideas that I am still learning how to master. In addition, the process of working through a Big Idea takes more time than projects that are media based but have little personal investment or involvement. However, my students are more actively engaged, ready to learn and less apt to produce fodder for landfills.

Art educators strive to differentiate their practices so that all learners can feel successful and begin to formulate higher order thinking skills. In addition, I believe that the process of teaching art through Big Ideas integrates higher tiers of in-depth learning and knowing. Students cannot just be passive within the process. The students are asked to engage, reflect and respond actively in many ways of knowing and creating. My teaching practices in incorporating Big Ideas strengthened my ability to assist students into developing their ideas beyond their initial premise. Moreover, the process of purposeful play, risk taking, experimentation, search and questioning are life skills that can assist students in becoming independent learners capable of serious inquiry.

Prior to my coursework within AE 604, I felt disconnected from my artmaking because it was not reflecting my personal connections. I worked through the process of using a Big Idea much like a student would begin to investigate. Through selecting my own big idea and topic, I was able to explore current issues that reflected my life and maturation as a woman and artist. My ability to visualize and explore the possibilities of my artmaking have assisted and enhanced my teaching. Active engagement within the artmaking process allows me to explore and create with similar boundaries and strategies I implement in my classroom. I have found that as I am more confident in my own artmaking strategies I become better at facilitating engaging and creative learning activities for my students.

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“Why Do We Have to Write in ART?”

How Digital Storytelling Enhances Creative
Process In Art Education

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April 1, 2013

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Based on AE 7606/ Technology and Digital Texts

My coursework in AE 7606, Technology and Digital Texts, began my explorations of discovering the role of digital storytelling as a process of personal and artistic exploration. Through the readings, I began to examine my own teaching pedagogy in relationship to technology and artmaking. As I was immersed in the story writing process, I thought about the important role of art in communicating stories. The human experience has been explored and recorded visually to communicate thoughts, feelings and ideas from the earliest cave paintings to more contemporary practices which utilize video and multimedia production. Inspiring personal narratives were generated from my teaching cohorts as we shared our experiences, significant moments and precious memories in a story circle. As the week progressed, we began to understand and experience the digital tools that would bring imagery to enhance our stories.

Through the stories that were generated in AE 7606, I got to know the struggles, empowering moments and humor of my cohorts on a new level of tangibility that would have been easily missed through every day conversations. As a result, a certain levels of vulnerability and intimacy were achieved through an application of technology that I had not experienced. I began to wonder how digital storytelling could enhance the creative and artistic experiences within my classroom. How could students use the power of multimedia tools to share their stories? How could students use digital storytelling to enhance creative thinking and understand the artistic process behind storytelling?

According to Resnick (2006), "Computers will not live up to their potential until we start to think of them less like televisions and more like paintbrushes"(p.1). Too often, computers and technology are used in ways that pacify true learning experiences. For

example, students may engage in learning through an educational game, that promotes entertainment as long as the participant is able to perform a set of routine tasks and expectations that are congruent to the educational goal of the game. This type of technological use keeps students on the surface of engaging in more meaningful learning experiences through technology. Moreover, creative applications of technology are not fostered or likely to occur. Resnick, (2006) supports that research has shown that a majority of the most powerful learning experiences of children occur when they are not simply interacting with materials but in designing, creating and inventing with them (p.4).

As I began to devise how to best approach digital storytelling within the classroom setting, I thought about how to give the process of creating a digital story structure to enhance students learning experiences while still allowing them creative control. In truth, though I was inspired by my own personal experiences with developing a digital story, I was somewhat intimidated about doing these technology based projects within the artroom. I was concerned that the students would be somewhat lost in the potential rigor of digital storytelling because I only see my elementary classes one day a week for forty (short) minutes. In addition, I was concerned about the writing aspect of creating digital stories. Our school has created an initiative to increase writing across the curriculum to assist developing writers in honing and improving their skills in many genres. While I would be supporting this initiative through assisting students in developing their own stories, I realize that teaching “writing” in art may be problematic to some students. I began to strategize ways to assist students in understanding how to develop the process of writing through the creation of art. Ultimately, I wanted students

to understand the power of combining art and storytelling. Digital storytelling requires and understanding the artistic process as a method of developing emerging literacy and communication skills.

I selected to work with my three sections of 5th grade students in the process of creating and developing digital stories. I selected 5th grade because all students have personal netbooks to utilize that can easily be transported to my class. In addition, I had hoped that 5th grade students would be more likely to have developed writing skills and would be working on the developing a personal voice within their writing. Moreover, my art program has been somewhat disassembled because the students that are in the lowest 20% in math and reading within their class have been pulled from their specials to participate in academic services to provide educational interventions to assist these students. This current practice of academic pullouts does not affect students that are special education or students that are gifted and talented. As a result, I generally have 5-6 students missing from every class. This type of practice creates a hierarchy of learning experiences and provides the benefit of visual arts programming to only an elite few.

Through this exclusion process it has been silently communicated that the arts are non-essential to growth, development and learning. I feel that my 5th grade students are keenly aware of this situation; the 5th graders that remain are either highly engaged and active, eager participants or they treat their time within the classroom as a holding place until they saunter off to their next scheduled programming. My hope is that through creating digital stories with these groups of students, I might encourage them to engage in a process of learning that could employ their personal interests;

demonstrating higher inquiry based learning processes. “When children care deeply about the projects they are working on, they are not only more motivated but they also develop deeper understandings and richer connections to knowledge” (Resnick, 2006, p.7). In addition, the layers and levels of learning in working with multimedia tools that digital storytelling provides, will allow students to explore contemporary literacy skills to meet the on-demand requirements of a fast-paced technological world.

While introducing digital storytelling to the students, we spent a short amount of time creating a KWL chart prior to the lesson. The KWL chart is a useful tool because it assists students in beginning to think about what they already know about a topic, think about what they want to know about a topic and gives closure to the lesson by students recalling what they have learned. In addition, this tool is helpful because it provides the teacher with a method of assessing students’ prior knowledge and knowledge gained through opening activities so future learning activities can address skill deficits or misinterpretations. Most of my students had no prior knowledge of what digital storytelling might be. However, a few, that had been participants in the gifted and talented program could describe what a digital story might be and had some experiences in creating a digital story.

I described digital storytelling as a multimedia experience that has the ability to combine various art medias such as illustration or photography and audio tracks to assist in narrating a story. For our classroom description of a digital story, I introduced digital stories as being similar to a post-card, a short narrative that relies on personal accounts that help examine our own beliefs and feelings about a certain topic. Our goal

within this project would be to investigate how art can be utilized to convey and communicate stories through the use of digital technologies.

I had pre-selected a few digital stories for students to view so that we could analyze and discuss digital storytelling in better detail. I found samples that were written by students that clearly illustrated a personal narrative from similar ages of my students. For example, one digital story was created by a 7th grade student, Kira Smith, entitled *Little Squalicum Beach*. Smith created a wonderful personal narrative of her encounters of a beach which is a beloved and special place near her home in Washington. Through watching her film I was impressed how she accurately portrays that mystical experience of exploring a place and the problems of toxic and human waste that plague the land.

After my students had watched the film we discussed her digital story in detail and critiqued the film. My students credited her use of combining personal photographs that made her narrative more compelling and interesting and gave a strong sense of the place. My students were also adept at finding issues with the audio tracks and changes in verbal pacing that detracted from the narrative. As a closing reflective question I asked my students to describe how digital storytelling could be considered art. Interestingly, I had many boys raise their hands, ready to share; "Well, it's art because you have to think about what pictures you select to match your story." Does it matter if you use your own pictures? Would her story been as affective if she had used pictures from the internet? A girl shared, "It depends on if she thought about what she was selecting and how she combined the images together." The media production process compels students to synthesize information, research and use creative and critical thinking in order to translate their ideas into some form of media expression (Ohler,

2008, p.11). The dialogue created by our first viewing of a digital story was worthy of one art session alone. My students began to think critically about how stories are a vital and necessary human experience and how digital tools can enhance and give us the opportunity to communicate with people of all walks of life.

After our successful discussion of the video, I felt confident that my students would be able to find success within the digital story process. Perhaps my fears of this project being too overwhelming were premature. I introduced the next phase of beginning to create a digital story would need to involve the use of writing a personal narrative. I selected the use of a personal narrative because I wanted students to have a broad-base to select from a range of topics which would describe something that actually happened and was relevant to their lives. I had prepared a sheet of writing prompts to get students thinking. The students brainstormed 3 personal narrative topics to and shared their ideas. In two of my three 5th grade sections, all systems appeared to be clearly set for the students to begin writing their narratives with ease and a full understanding of the purpose and the nature of the process. In my one section of 5th grade, I heard it, a voice that had the appeal of nails down a chalk board, "Why do we have to write in Art?" Clearly, this class was not my focus group, or was it?

I realized then as I approached the critical aspect of creating a personal narrative that I could not present writing in a typical way. While writing a story is a major component of storytelling, it could not appear to be structured like the writing that students are accustomed to in a classroom setting. I needed to provide ways for my reserved writers and non-writers to begin to create narratives in a way that provided enough scaffolding to get them invested in the project. I needed students to realize that

they have a unique voice that is capable of resonating off a page. I set up opportunities for students to create interviews with their peers rather than delve into the writing process. While this process was not meant to replace the writing process, it was created to solidify and enhance the stories that the students possess. I had hoped that by allowing the students to converse would bring some peer support to assist students in realizing that we all possess some sort of story.

I had students participate in collaborative interviews to gain further insight into their personal stories. I designed a sampling of questions in which peer groups could use to collect and record information on their partner. The questions varied and there were different topics as starting points such as places, accomplishments, adventures, interests/hobbies, relationships. The interviewer could select a topic that was agreed upon by the partner. Questions for topics were general and broad-based to provide a variety of responses involving personal reflection. For example, under the relationship topic everyday heroes is a category of interview questions. Such questions consist of;

- What is an everyday hero?
- What characteristics should someone have to be an everyday hero?
- Describe the person most like an everyday hero in your life.
- What can they teach you about behaving like a hero?
- Could you be a hero? How?

This exercise that gave students the opportunity to work in a collaborative manner and a solution to that was a bit out of the norm as a writing process. I found that using this peer interview strategy gave many more clarity as to what their stories were about.

“Finding and clarifying stories helps people to understand the context of their lives”

(Lambert et al., 2010, p.10). In addition, I begin to see more of a willingness to begin to develop stories that were personal and related directly to the lives of my students.

As students began to complete their writing after several class sessions we began the process of helping the students become storytellers that can bring imagery and audio together to enhance and create a compelling story. Digital stories require students to create storyboards, story maps, media lists and other planning products in the media production process (Ohler, 2008, p.11). Requiring students to pre-plan a storyboard made them slow down and think about what steps they needed to take to enhance their writings. Technology can provide a myriad of choices but that does not mean that *all* choices are the best way to convey subtleties combining narrative, imagery and audio. Some visual and audio should be used like glitter in the artroom, maybe a little here and there; special occasions and holidays, but certainly not every day. This media production process required my students to synthesize their imagination by using creative and critical thinking to begin to conceive of transforming their concept into a digital format.

I was quite surprised when I presented storyboarding to my 5th grade students and virtually none, for the exception of my gifted and talented students, were familiar with the conceptual model of a storyboard. Storyboarding can be used to plan out a digital story by separating the various elements into two separate layers. The first layer of the storyboard places events in sequential order. “The second layer is the interaction: how the audio- the voice-over narrative of your story and the music interacts with the images or video” (Lambert et al, 2010, p.31). A storyboard should also be a place to

plan how the visual effects like animations and transitions will be arranged. In addition, storyboarding will save time, energy and money when it comes to producing the actual story within the program. Storyboarding will also provide students with needed structure to help them organize the massive amount of information. Moreover, storyboarding begins to assist developing artists to help them understand the process behind the product.

Interestingly, many students groan when seeing that the storyboard process involves organization. However, I find that storyboarding enhances the artistic process of digital storytelling. I have students try to rush the process only to find that they made careless mistakes along the way and then re-hash their efforts. I have had students begin to plan the structure of their story and then re-order their paragraphs as they edit. As the class moves through the storyboard process, I have them participate in peer edit process. Prior to the peer edit, we discussed as a group the qualities of interesting and compelling stories. We reviewed past discussions of some of the digital stories we had previewed as models. I asked open ended questions to the students to guide them to think about how quality stories present a strong point of view and have an emotional element.

Through the peer edit, students partner up with another student they do not generally have the opportunity to work with. The students discussed their storyboards and explain their rationale for including certain visual elements. I incorporated the use of a structured critique to assist students in giving feedback to their peers. I discovered prompts from Center for Digital Storytelling, (2013) for providing peer feedback about

specific aspects of the digital story. These comments gave the students structure on which comments are useful when providing feedback, such as:

- What I liked about your story...
- What stood out about the story...
- What I didn't understand about the story...
- The feeling I got from the story...
- Your story makes me think of these pictures/images...

I provided the peer groups with Post-It have to provide feedback as short notes. For example, one peer group of two 5th grade girls suggested that the other incorporate some of her own personal music because she knew her friend was good at composing electronic music. Another group of 5th grade boys were debating about creating a singular background and having images of himself within different scenarios in that environment. His digital story is about being accident prone and is an account of all of his injurious behaviors that have occurred. The peer to peer editing session gave the students an opportunity to revise their visual elements before preparing to learn the technology aspect of digital story creation.

I realized that my students were going to need some training with the technology and playing with the elements of digital storytelling before attempting to create their digital versions of their storyboards. During one class session students were introduced to the editing process and features within Microsoft Photo Story 3. I demonstrated how to incorporate images, record and insert audio and create transitions using pacing. After the demonstration was over I had the students “play” with the program by incorporating images and creating a “nonsense” story that related to their selection of images. I required them to work with pacing to create a short digital segment that would be 1

minute in length. This practice session was invaluable to the process because it allowed me to troubleshoot any technical problems and work with small student groups. It also allowed the students to share their knowledge as they proceeded to delve more deeply into the program.

After all of this practice, planning and knowledge building my students were finally ready to begin the digital story process with their own personal stories. However, as I compose this paper, many of my student projects are still works in process rather than finished products. I feel that through this process my students are beginning to understand how technology can enhance creative thinking. Moreover, my students are experiencing and learning how to apply technology and explore the possibilities that this new digital media presents. Much of what I desire for my students to improve upon within their digital storytelling simply reflects my inexperience at teaching the writing and digital process within the context of my classroom. However, I do see my students embracing the opportunity to create in the artroom using a “new” media. In addition, I see my students beginning to see that great media creations such as animations, movies and video games are not simply creative products that fell from the sky. The conceptual models of those multi-media creations start with playful and structured processes to explore and conceive of possibilities.

I faced a variety of problematic issues while teaching and implementing the digital storytelling process. After every 5th grade class session, I would reflect, edit and revise my approach. Generally, by the end of the week, I would have a system that would lead my students to finding success with our resources, tools and amount of time.

In truth, after we set up and introduce concepts, ½ hour of visual arts is simply not enough time to engage and execute the totality of what I had desired to accomplish during each class. I was continuously reminding myself to be patient, trying to give my students enough work time to become engaged in ideas and also to not make the process so long that they become disengaged. In the future, I think that I would implement digital storytelling in partnership with the classroom teacher in order to assist development in the writing process. In addition, the technology teacher is much better equipped for recording audio and enhancing artwork using drawing tablets.

Another challenge of implementing this digital story unit was my desire to give my students many possibilities for the content of the digital stories. While I did provide writing prompts that students could select from to begin the concept for the personal narrative, I did not say it had to be about a certain topic. I had hoped that by giving that freedom of content that students would be more likely to select a topic that they truly desired to pursue. Many of my students struggled because they could not commit to being invested in the process. I need to provide them with more brainstorming and more playful writing activities to assist them in developing their concepts behind their narratives. The process of creating a digital story creates a new work of art that is formed from the perspective and individualized ideas of the artist. For some 5th grade students, working on developing art in this fashion relies on utilizing their own creativity and concepts. Producing a digital story cannot rely on mimicking the example of the teacher. The students were asked to be engineers of their own creative endeavors. To some of my students, being given the freedom to create, even with structured

parameters, was terrifying. Sadly, my students need more exposure and opportunities to think creatively.

Resnick (2006) states we must make sure that children's creativity is nurtured and developed, providing children with opportunities to exercise, refine, and extend their creative abilities. That will require new approaches to education and learning— and new types of technologies to support those new approaches. The ultimate goal is a society of creative individuals who are constantly inventing new possibilities for themselves and their communities. (p.12)

Research has demonstrated that American creativity has been declining. Creative thinking require divergent thinking by generating many unique ideas and then convergent thinking to combine those ideas together to achieve the optimal result (Bronson & Merryman, 2010). Resnick contends, while it is still too early to determine the specific cause of why creativity rates are in decline, an increasing number of educators and psychologists have expressed concern that computers are stifling children's learning and creativity because of the passive nature of the interaction with technology (as cited in Cordes and Miller, 2000; Oppenheimer, 2003). As educators, we need to provide our students with a variety of ways to maintain and enhance their creative thinking.

Rather than allowing students to learn passively through technology, teachers need to provide challenges that utilize the unique learning opportunities that technology can provide. This type of teaching and facilitating does not always come in a neat and

tidy package that sits quietly at a desk. This type of creative thinking sometimes gets messy, uncharted and on occasion does not work after hours of investigation.

Creative learning processes do not always allow for the teacher to control the outcome of the product because of the variable nature of the end result. Consequently, students learn to reconfigure when met with an undesired outcome, rather than wither in defeat.

Learning through the arts provides this type of environment and experience through the structure of the artistic process. Technology must be used within this environment in order for students to understand that creativity can be investigated through technological measures.

Despite my bumps and bruises along the way while implementing my digital storytelling project, I believe that my students are truly benefitting and understanding that art is a process. They are beginning to formulate divergent avenues of thought by pursuing topics that are relevant and personal in their contemporary lifestyles.

Moreover, they are experiencing creating in a more similar manner to contemporary media artists. My students know that media productions are produced with specific and detailed plans to affect communication with the viewer. As a result, my students are more likely to understand that art is a form of communication that is indispensable within the digital age. My students are better prepared to be active participants in visual culture rather than passive recipients with little understanding of how multi-media shapes and shares personal perspectives of the world in which they live.

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CONCLUSION:

**Statement of Enhanced Learning and Teaching Pedagogy in Art
Education**

When I first began the process of pursuing my Master's in Art Education, I wanted to improve my teaching practices to create lessons that were highly engaging, meaningful and inspiring to students. I knew that the arts provide a myriad of higher order learning opportunities through active involvement in learning processes. However, as I went through the process of obtaining my Master's in Art Education, I have felt the desire to scream from the rooftops about the *quality* of learning that is now beginning to occur within my classroom. Structuring lessons to explore creative processes through the use of Big Ideas, exploring concepts of contemporary artists and visual culture has made the arts assessable and relevant to the contemporary lifestyles of my students. Exploration and creative "play" with concepts, ideas and media have become a fundamental framework within my lesson to assist students in developing their ideas and making meaningful connections with the Big Idea. Through scaffolding and planning, "play" has become process in which students begin to develop an artistic and engaging experience within the arts. Moreover, my students have begun to interact, collaborate and share ideas through the "fun".

In addition, through the process of obtaining my Master's of Art Education through The Mostly On-Line program I feel I have become a stronger, more formidable advocate of maintaining quality standards of Art Education. I believe that educators must continuously develop their practices in order to meet and surpass their professional goals. I believe this is especially important in teaching a subject area like visual arts. With the state of education in America, content areas like the visual arts are under scrutiny. I believe that the arts are vital to students learning 21st century skills. By

using research based processes supported by academia, I can demonstrate that the arts are necessary in our schools and in the lives of students.

It is my belief that the arts provide an avenue to learning that supports dynamic possibilities of synthesizing information and learning. Research supports that creativity scores in America have been on decline in primary grade children (Bronson & Merryman, 2010, para. 5). In many educational settings, the focus of testing and assessing of student achievement relies on final products and rubrics that give emphasis to predictable, pre-determined outcomes (Zimmerman, 2009, p.394). As a result, students are often disengaged within the process of learning and lack the motivation to pursue questions that go beyond rote memorization skills and demonstrate divergent thinking. Within the visual arts, creativity cannot simply rely on "self-expression" as an inquiry based process that produces high levels of creative engagement. The visual arts can assist in preparing students for the informational age of the 21st century through interventions that foster creative thinking, imagination, innovation and generate potential real life solutions to real life problems and experiences (Zimmerman, 2009, p.394).

The process of obtaining an education is more than garnering traditional school based knowledge. Rather, an education includes the gaining of personal life skills paired with active engagement of the learning process. Being an art educator can be exhausting in the sense that we are always aiming to inspire. We aspire to find the corresponding relationships with cross discipline studies, relate art to everyday life and try to make the arts accessible through our classroom in the hopes that our students will understand the value of art. Art communicates the human experience and can assist

students into developing a dialogue and unique perspective about how they envision the world. The creation of art is not about assembly line products. Rather, art educators strive to differentiate their practices so that all learners can feel successful and begin to formulate higher order thinking skills. Through my investigative studies within the Mostly On-line Master's Program, I am better prepared to assist students into developing their ideas beyond their initial premise. Moreover, the process of purposeful play, risk taking, experimentation, search and questioning are life skills that can assist students in becoming independent learners capable of serious inquiry.

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